



## BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith  
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### BLOOMERS

My alma mater, the British Schools, was founded in 1908. Established at the request of the British Community in Uruguay, it was inspired by and modelled on public schools in Great Britain. It was and is a secular, co-educational institution created to provide primary and secondary education—in English and Spanish—to the children of the British and foreign communities and select Uruguayan families. Like our peers in the UK, we wore uniforms: green pleated tunics for girls, grey flannel suits for boys. During the decade I was there, in the 1950s, the boys took this tradition in their stride. The girls, for the most part, had few complaints about the tunic, but had a great deal to say about what they were required to wear under it. For, in those days, the Schools insisted that girls wear bloomers. What exactly are bloomers? Let's start with a little history.

In the mid-eighteen hundreds women began rebelling against the starched petticoats and whale-bone corsets they had been wearing, rejecting them as inconvenient and harmful to their health. A new fashion emerged at about that time, which was a combination of Turkish pantaloons and knee-length skirts that provided unrestricted movement and an unprecedented sense of freedom. This loose-fitting style was seen as a rebuff to the despotism of Parisian fashion, and became associated with the rise of feminism and demands for women's rights. In 1851 the "Turkish dress" was introduced to Amelia Bloomer (1818–1894), an American women's rights and temperance advocate, at her home in New York. Bloomer was the owner and editor of *The Lily*, the first American newspaper published by and for women. She wrote an article with a description of the dress and instructions on how to make it. When other newspapers picked up the story they dubbed it the "Bloomer dress," and the name stuck.

Though a "bloomer craze" swept the United States in the summer of 1851 and the fashion was all the rage in cities around the world, it soon fell out of favour and was gradually abandoned. But towards the end of the century bloomers made a comeback as part of an attempt to improve women's health through exercise. The style was remembered as the "cleanest, neatest, most comfortable and most sensible garment," and an updated version, without the skirt, became a popular choice for women during the bicycle craze of the 1890s. These "athletic bloomers" (also called knickerbockers) were baggy britches, fastened to the leg just below the knee, and were a big hit with women who did some sort of exercise at the turn of the century. Bloomers were shortened in the late 1920s, and gradually morphed into a modesty garment that was mainly worn by school girls under their tunics. Which brings us back to the British Schools.



I recently conducted some informal research amongst the women of my generation who were at school with me. After coming across a newspaper article about the history of bloomers, I was interested to find out if my contemporaries remembered wearing them, and if so what they recalled about the experience. I learned that they certainly did remember wearing bloomers, and the memories were still fresh in their minds sixty-odd years later. What was it about



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this garment that had left such a permanent mark on so many young girls?

For one thing, they were obligatory, which rankled some, though not all. For another, they were voluminous, which horrified almost everyone. At an age when girls were blossoming into young women most, if not all, were self-conscious about their figures, and those large, baggy bloomers were considered unattractive, unladylike, and unbecoming. To be fair, however, these negative opinions mainly simmered up with the onset of puberty. Prior to that, it was understood that the dreaded bloomers were worn strictly for modesty purposes and, as such, made sense for younger girls inclined to cartwheeling or hand standing. They also provided a sense of security when sitting cross-legged to play payana [jacks], preventing little peeping Toms at the gateway to the boys' playground from catching sight of the more feminine garments worn underneath. Unsurprisingly, some believe that bloomers were designed solely to cool the ardour of young boys. There was certainly nothing fetching or flattering about them.

What, then, were those bloomers actually like? It depends who you ask. Most agree that they were made of green cotton flannel, with a small pocket that some thought was useless but others used to carry a little hanky. Though occasionally knitted by mothers, they were usually bought, along with other school uniform items, at Tienda Inglesa or London Paris, the main department stores in Montevideo at the time. Some say they were soft and comfortable; others remember the exact opposite. They had elastic strung around the waist and legs, which would sometimes "go" in one leg or the other, making

the fabric hang down until it was mended, causing additional embarrassment and distress. Some thought they were unbearably hot; others gratefully remember pulling them down to their knees to keep them warm on cold winter days, especially when riding a bicycle or when the wind flicked up their skirt, like Marilyn Monroe's in *The Seven Year Itch*. Some remember being picked on by older girls who lifted up their tunic in the playground and loudly announced that "someone was not wearing bloomers." Others, especially those who had grown up elsewhere, flatly refused to wear them. Those girls got into all kinds of trouble, but had them on the following day, a sign of the Schools' steadfast commitment to its principles—one of which, incidentally, was "to form character and teach its pupils to live wisely and well after they go out into the world."

We have surely all discovered, sometimes to our amazement, that our childhood memories don't always match what others remember, and that is true in this case too. The women of my generation have vivid, often conflicting, memories of their bloomer experience, and I am grateful to them for sharing those recuerdos—fond or otherwise—for this story. This poem is dedicated to them:

### Bloomers!

"Some girls from the famed British Schools,  
 when accused of ignoring the rules,  
 said: "They're nothing but rumours,  
 we always wear bloomers!  
 Do you think we're complete bloody fools?"